

The Dust Bowl:

Urgent lessons from a decade of duress

In the 1930s, two catastrophes hit North America: one environmental, the other economic. AFI Executive Director Evan Fraser discusses this in the CBC Ideas documentary 'Dust Bowl Blues', when a cascading series of disasters triggered devastation, political turmoil, heartbreak and loss. It also delivered important insights and lessons for today's uncertain world.

What was the Dust Bowl?

Through the 1920s and 1930s, a massive multi-year drought extended from Edmonton across to Winnipeg, down through Colorado, Kansas and Oklahoma, and south to New Mexico and the Texas panhandle. The dry land baked under extreme heat, and as the earth dried out, the light, sandy soil was lifted away by the strong Prairie and Midwestern winds. The resulting soil storms, and the rural economic devastation that followed, became known as the [Dust Bowl](#)—or, up here in Canada, the [Dirty Thirties](#).

Major dust storms could last for hours, blocking the sun. And the dust went everywhere: into houses, into food, into lungs. The fine blowing matter could shear off a field of wheat at the base, and soil drifts piled so high herds would wander over the tops of fence lines.

Due to the Great Depression, sparked by the Wall Street crash of 1929, those in agriculture had no strong economy to fall back on. Many farmers packed up and left, sparking waves of environmental migration. But many people stayed, out of stubbornness, love and community; because no-one else wanted their beleaguered land; or simply because they were too poor to leave.

Did farming practices make things worse?

Farming rapidly expanded into new regions during the 1910s and 1920s. This "plow-up" loosened the soil and primed the system for collapse. But historian [Pamela Riney-Kehrberg](#), from Iowa State University, says this epochal drought would have caused major harm, even without 'sod busters' and their plows. "Some of the areas that blew the worst had never been plowed—they'd always been grazing land," she says. "It was a [one in a] thousand-year drought. ... In a sense, it doesn't matter what farmers would have done."



"Dust storm, Pearce airport, Lethbridge area, Alberta.", 1942, (CU185875) by unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives, Glenbow Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

"The Great Plains have not changed.
All it takes is another drought."



*Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Distinguished
Professor of History, Iowa State University*

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AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH



THE DUST BOWL

The Dust Bowl drove hundreds of thousands of people—many of them tenant farmers or young people—off the land and into urban areas, where they often met antagonism and struggled to find work. The people who stayed behind took desperate measures to survive, says environmental migration researcher [Robert McLeman](#), from Wilfrid Laurier University: trapping skunks for the fur trade, catching and preserving ground squirrels to eat, picking nettles bare-handed to provide some kind of food for cattle. Meanwhile, cities and towns were inundated with displaced farmers. The widespread desperation prompted governments to act.



"Destitute family in Edmonton, Alberta, while returning to Saskatoon from the Peace River country." June 1934, (CU164824) by McDermid Studio. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives, Glenbow Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.



"Badly drifted field, Hanna area, Alberta.", [ca. 1930s], (CU1117191) by unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives, Glenbow Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Survival took grit and government help

Real solutions emerged from the Dust Bowl maelstrom, and many of them were created by government in partnership with farmers. Agriculture specialists developed new farming practices, such as soil conservation measures, drought-resistant crops, shelter belts, and more. Government programs paid farmers to implement these new measures. Together these programs proved extremely effective and led to new conservation practices being embraced in both Canada and the US.

Policies changed, too. In Canada, the Dirty Thirties led to long-term weather forecasting, crop insurance, financial support for low-income people in rural communities, and creation of the [Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act](#). Meanwhile, the twin crises of the 1930s led the U.S. government to launch [The New Deal](#), offer loans to farmers to stay on the land, create programs that provided interim work across the country, and found the [Soil Conservation Service](#), which still exists today.

When the rain finally returned, the land recovered, and many of these lessons were lost.

Modern parallels, and key lessons

The Dust Bowl was an economic and environmental emergency. Climatically, another prolonged, hot drought is not an *if*; it's a *when*. And as the impacts of climate change escalate, the odds get progressively worse.

On the economic side, warning signs are blaring. This decade has exposed major weaknesses in Canada's food system. Our supply chains are vulnerable, one in four Canadians are food insecure, and geopolitics is fraught. We are now living in economically uncertain times, facing an increasingly destabilized climate.

It is a critical moment to learn the lessons of history, both in how we farm, and how we support farmers.

"Fast-forward to the present day, in many parts of the world where there are still large rural populations, this sort of polycrisis is re-emerging right now."



Robert McLeman, Professor of Geography and Environmental Studies, Wilfrid Laurier University



Key lessons

- Government has an indispensable role to play in protecting farmland and keeping low-income people from falling into poverty traps.
- [Food security is critical to national security](#). This means two things. First, we need a much stronger social safety net to protect low-income families. Second, agri-food needs to be positioned as central to Canada's future viability and elevated in terms of federal priorities.
- Strong government policy should create incentives to protect the environment, promote soil conservation practices, and reward producers for ecosystem services that flow from beneficial management practices.
- The primary line of defence against hard times is community with grit. Governments should invest in regional and rural communities, and provide localized infrastructure to support food production, processing, and community access.



Learn more:

The Arrell Food Institute

[The Arrell Food Institute \(AFI\)](#) at the University of Guelph brings diverse people and ideas together to create healthier, more sustainable and more equitable food futures. Through research, education and collaboration, we work to spark ideas and drive change across food systems.

AFI's Issue Briefs turn complex challenges into clear, actionable insights. Each brief shares evidence-based knowledge and real-world perspectives to inform, inspire and influence public understanding, policy and practice.

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